Autobiographical notes

Autobiographical Notes By E. Lakin Brown Edited by his Daughter, A. Ada Brown Schoolcraft, Michigan 1905

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At the extreme old age of nearly eighty-three years I begin to write the history of a life whose importance and success, if compared with the lives of those whom the world calls successful business men or with any of those who have attained eminence in any of the higher callings and pursuits of life, would seem to be utterly insignificant. Yet, with respect to most of those among whom I have lived, and having regard to my early opportunities and advantages—or the want of them—my life has been not wholly unsuccessful. It is only at the urgent request of my children, and in the hope that it may be a gratification to them after I shall have passed away, that I have undertaken this brief sketch of my life history, and it is uncertain at what point the infirmities of age, or the ruthless hand that shuts the book of life of every mortal, may bring it to a close.

I have never kept a journal, and almost no records of circumstance or date to which I can refer; and it is almost entirely upon memory that I must rely for the facts of this biography; consequently it must necessarily be meager and incomplete both in regard to facts, incidents and arrangement.

I was born in the township of Plymouth. Vermont, April 16, 1809. My father and mother, whose maiden name was Sally Parker, were of pure New England stock; my father, Thomas Brown, being fourth in descent from John Brown of Hawkeden, Suffolk county, England, who married (April 24, 1655) Esther Makepeace of Boston, England, and immediately sailed for America and settled at Watertown, Massachusetts. My mother,

daughter of Ebenezer Parker, was born in Westford, Massachusetts. I was the third —the eldest son—of a family of eleven children, five sons and six daughters, all of whom except one—Joseph, who died at the age of ten years—grew up, and became the fathers and mothers of families.

The township of Plymouth is situated in the midst of the Green Mountains, its west line being nearly coincident with the ridge dividing the waters that flow into the Connecticut River, from those that flow into Lake Champlain. The mountains, or hills, rise in many places by a gradual but pretty steep ascent, and were, eighty years ago, pretty well wooded; while in other places they are precipitous, bare, rugged mountains, especially where they face upon the water courses. The face of the township is in general, rough and rugged, with some plateaus of tolerably level, productive grass land, originally swamps. A hard, rugged country to settle and live in.

My father had a small farm about a half mile south of what was known as Plymouth Notch, where a tavern house of two stories—the outside walls lathed and plastered, a fashion much in vogue there in the early days, owing, I suppose, to the abundance of lime which was manufactured in the town, a small store and a blacksmith shop were all that rendered it conspicuous.

The town was settled almost exclusively by people of New England birth, and largely from Massachusetts. My grand-father, Bowman Brown, moved from Lunenburg, Massachusetts, to Plymouth in 1789, and was the fourth settler in the township. He located on Gift Editor 8 Ag ‘05 GEG Black River, where he resided until his death in 1806. The place was then occupied by his son Daniel some seven or eight years, when he removed to Owego, N. Y., and was succeeded by Nathaniel, who had resided many years in Bedford, Mass. He was the eldest son of the family, and for the time and place a thrifty and able farmer. Some years before his death he transferred the farm to his son-in-law, Moses Pollard, who married his daughter Abigail. Pollard continued to reside there, and raised a numerous family, but after the death of his wife sold out and removed to Ludlow, so that

the old homestead has passed out of the possession of the Brown family. It was a noted place in the township on the river road that led to Ludlow and Cavendish. A narrow strip sloping to the river bottom, where the road passed, the house just above the road, and then a steep ascent to the top of the mountain. The river bottom on this farm alone, was a pretty wide track of originally alder swamp, reclaimed at length into a most admirable and productive hay meadow.

The upland was in general too steep to plow, and the meadow too wet, so that there was but little arable land on the place, but the yield of hay was abundant, and supported a large amount of stock, while the steep upland, when cleared of timber, afforded pasturage. Time and labor made it one of the best farms in the township, but it was an exceedingly hard place when in a state of nature for a poor settler to occupy.

Directly to the north about three miles and separated from the river by a mountain chain, was an elevated uneven plateau, some hundreds of feet higher than the river valley, in the midst of which was situated the little hamlet called the Notch, before alluded to.

The little farm on which my parents began their house-keeping consisted of some 80 or 100 acres, extending from the top of the mountain, commonly called the Blueberry Hill, down to its base on the plateau, and across this comparatively level bit of land, and a ravine and brook and a little beyond to the base of East Mountain, affording probably not over 25 or 30 acres of fairly arable land, and that in detached pieces or fields. Just at the base of the mountain was a little cottage of two rooms and an unfinished garret. The house was lathed and plastered outside as well as in, according to the fashion of the place. When I was about six years old an addition was made to the house of a fair-sized working room, a little bedroom and a buttery.

Across the road was a 30 by 40 foot barn, and on one side of the house a very fine bearing orchard of some five acres.

The house and barn were built, I believe, by Robert Bishop, who married my father's sister, Abigail. Nearly all of the arable land had already been cleared, but the woods on the west hill came down to within a few rods of the house.

My father was the tenth of a family of eleven children of Bowman and Abigail (Page) Brown. He was but nine years old when the family removed from Lunenburg, Mass., to Plymouth. He had never had any schooling, and of course received none after; the country was new, wild and rugged, and almost without the most ordinary means of subsistence, and it required all the time and energies of the family to procure the means of sustaining existence. But my father was possessed of an iron constitution, was inured to work and entered bravely upon the task of sustaining a family that soon became numerous, on his rough little 4 farm. He was a man of excellent judgment, strong common sense, most acute feeling, and was strongly attached to his family, and indeed to anything that was his family, and indeed to anything that was his. He was able to read, and to write and cipher sufficiently to keep his little accounts.

My mother's mother, whose maiden name was Keep, had a family of sixteen children; her first husband's name was Hildreth. The larger number of the children were by the second husband Ebenezer Parker. All the children lived to adult age.

Salmon Dutton, the original settler and proprietor of the village of Duttonsville, in Cavendish, Vermont, married grand-father Parker's sister. So it happened that on a visit to the Parker family at Westford, Mass, finding the children more abundant than the means of properly providing for them, he took two of the younger ones, John, aged seven years, and Sally, aged five, and carried them on horse back, John riding behind and Sally in his arms before, to his home in Vermont and raised them to man and womanhood. John became in due time a merchant in Duttonsville and died while still in his early manhood of a prevailing epidemic of spotted fever, about 1813, greatly beloved and lamented, leaving a wife and three children.

In the village of Duttonsville my mother had the opportunity of acquiring a very good education, according to the fashion of the times, which she improved to the utmost. Naturally bright she learned easily and stood among the first in school. Very fond of reading she became familiar with the best English authors such as Addison, Johnson, Steele, Swift, Pope and Dryden, and with Homer and Virgil through the translations of the two last named. I well remember when a boy hearing her recite long passages from the Iliad and the Aeneid, though she had seen neither for long years. I have known few if any better readers than she was. For distinc ion ness of utterance, readiness and accuracy of comprehension and the power of conveying the exact meaning, I have never seen her excelled.

In religion my parents were both Universalists. My mother was a great reader of the Bible, and could generally tell instantly where any passage was to be found. She was quite fond of controversy upon religious topics. She was a great admirer of Hosea Ballou, then the great apostle of the Universalists. She was familiar with the arguments of that acute reasoner, and many an orthodox clergyman found himself *hors de combat* in a most unexpected way in controversy with her.

My father was a straight, perfectly formed man, five feet ten inches in height, weight about 160 pounds, quick and agile. My mother was of delicate make. She had a very clear, delicate skin, a high forehead, very sensitive handsome lips, was most sensitive to pain, and altogether must have been more than ordinarily attractive in her youth. Both had black eyes and hair black as a raven.

The outfit of a farmer in those days was very primitive and simple. A yoke of oxen, an ox cart, a sled, a plow, a log chain, a shovel and a hoe, a scythe, a sickle, a rake and a pitchfork was about all that was required.

The grain was threshed with a flail, and cleaned with a fan, generally of willow, shaped like a clamshell, and operated upon the kness by alternate motions to right and left, and little

tossings up and down, with a wing held in the hand to brush off the chaff as it was worked to the surface. I was quite 5 a large lad before I ever saw any other way of cleaning grain, when my father, in company with a neighbor farmer, bought an ill-constructed fanning mill, but a great improvement upon the hand fan.

Besides the operations upon the little farm, my father owned a lime-stone ledge,—as it was called—that is, a small bit of land in the region of lime-stone about a mile from home, and a lime-kiln, where in the winter time he used to make more or less, always at least one kiln of lime, the kiln containing, I think, about one hundred hogsheads; This helped materially in ekeing out the family expenses. The lime-making at Plymouth was for many years quite an extensive business. There was little if any made anywhere else in the vicinity, and people came from the surrounding towns to purchase it. The family or settlement of Shakers at Enfield, N. H., always bought their lime supply of my father, and paid in articles of their own manufacture, such as spinning wheels, tubs and pails, dry measures of all sizes, turned ware, whips, garden seeds, and various other articles, all of a make and quality vastly superior to any that could be obtained elsewhere. It was always a time of great interest to us youngsters, when the old Shakers would came with their load of goods, and stay over night, talking their peculiar dialect, and discoursing upon their peculiar notions and habits. They dwelt especially upon the necessity of celibacy to enable one to live a spiritual life. I recollect that when father objected on the ground that that doctrine if adopted would lead to the end of the race, the old Shaker, with whom he was talking, shrewdly answered that there was no danger.

There is very little lime now made at Plymouth. The facilities for transportation and other causes have conduced to throw its manufacture into other localities where it can be done cheaper. There was a time when lime was so common an article of traffic that it became a medium of payment for ordinary debts, and store balances and other indebtedness were settled by note payable in “lime to fill;” that is, lime to fill as many hogshead as it would require to settle the debt, without the hogshead; that being merely a measure of quantity;

whereas, if the note was for hogsheads of lime the law would require the hogshead with the lime contained.

Another common mode of settling debts, peculiar to the time in that impecunious community, was by note “payable in neat stock, at the appraisal of men.” These notes were generally made payable on the first day of October, that being about the time of year when farmers got up their stock from out-pastures, and when merchants began to buy up cattle for the Brighton market.

But it is about time to leave these preliminaries and get at some of the incidents in the life of the hero of the story. The first remarkable thing that tradition relates is that for some unknown reason the good-natured babe was to be weaned at the tender age of three months. For this purpose the mother made a visit to her friends in Duttonsville, leaving the babe in charge of its father, from whose hand it drank milk from a cup, and caused not the slightest trouble from being debarred from the mother's breast. As I grew to the age of two or three years my health was tolerably good, though I was rather thin and delicate; not sufficiently robust to suit my father and he was confident that the proper degree of hardiness could be induced by a daily cold water 6 bath. So every morning I was taken from the bed and earried naked to the tank a few rods from the house, and soused all over into the cold water with which the tank was fed from a mountain spring, and then wrapped in a blanket and carried in to the fire. But the reaction never took place; I grew thinner and thinner, my lips became colorless and it was soon evident that the heroic cold water treatment must be discontinued. I soon recovered my usual health and went on favorably until in an evil day I was sent to the district school, which was taught, or rather kept that summer by a Miss Hawkins, of Bridgewater; a person evidently unfit to be entrusted with the care of children. I had learned the alphabet at home and was advanced to syllables of two letters called the “abs.” When called to the teacher's knee I would readily name the letters but nothing could induce me to pronounce the syllable till it was pronounced by the teacher. Finally, impatient at my refusal to say what I was not sure was right, the teacher began to threaten. She placed me upon my little bench, and taking a string, put it around

my neck and the other end around a big nail which was driven in the wall above my head, began to wind up until it grew tight, and then telling me that she should wind it up until I was choked to death and would never go home any more, the scholars began to cry, the school was in an uproar, and she was obliged to desist. But the fright had been too great, I was dead sick, and had to be carried home, where I lay sick with fever for some days. It need not be said that I was sent no more to Miss Hawkins' school. As soon as I was well, my education was taken charge of at home, and before the summer was past I could read very readily in any easy reading.

I will relate another event which happened in my early childhood, not because it was of any importance in itself, but because of the effect it had upon my child's mind, and the fear and trouble it caused me for long years. I will premise that from our home no house was visible in either direction, though it was but about 100 rods to the nearest neighbor on the north, but the town grave-yard was between, on the side of a steep hill, close along and by the side of which, the road ran, a little curve of the cemetery hill shutting all human habitation out of sight. One day it was discovered that a grave recently occupied by an old lady Grandma Grover—had been robbed of its occupant; the ghouls had been alarmed at their work and left the grave but partly filled. In that quiet little community this was an awful and solemn thing and large numbers of men were out in search of any indications of the route the robbers had taken. They were tracked across the fields down into the adjacent swamp, and it was found where a wagon had waited for them some distance out on the Bridgewater road, and there all trace was lost. It was supposed the body had gone to the dissecting room at Woodstock, and interest in the matter had measurably ceased, when one day as Cephas Moore was looking for sheep on a rough hill pasture, north-west of the school-house, he suddenly came upon a gruesome object, partly hidden with bark by the side of a large log, which proved to be the lost body of Grandma Grover. Of course, the wonder and the awe and the gloomy talk were renewed, and the result of it was to me that the grave-yard became a thing of terror, and to 7 pass it alone even in the day time was a fearful thing and in the night a horror not be endured. But as all our errands and

communication with the world were in that direction the case was a most annoying and distressing one, and was one of the greatest causes of my childish griefs and terrors.

The year 1816 was memorable throughout New England as the cold year. In Vermont there was not a month without frost. Corn, except in some favored situations on the Connecticut River, was a total failure and the destitution of the poor was very great. The preceding year was the close of the war with Great Britain. I well remember hearing the cannon at Rutland, fired in celebration of the declaration of peace.

One morning, I think in the latter part of November, 1819, a young lady appeared at my father's door, whose advent was to prove of considerable importance to the older children of the family. She was Miss Susan F. Cook daughter of my father's sister, Nancy. The family had removed some years previously to Keeseville, N. Y. Susan had been educated at Plattsburg in most of the learning and accomplishments that it was the fashion of the times to give young ladies. She had come a few days before to my Uncle Nat's, as we familiarly called my uncle who then occupied the old homestead on Black River. She came to him because he was reputed to be in easy circumstances, and was intending to spend the winter there, and in the spring to find, if possible, some place to open a school for young ladies. Now Uncle Nat was one of the kindest-hearted, best men in the world, but sometimes rough in speech. One morning Susan had not risen, while the mother was hard at work upon the washing. Uncle Nat observing this, called loudly, and chided her for lying in bed while “mother” was doing her washing. Susan arose in tears, and at once started on foot for her Uncle Tom's, and arrived as I have said, the tears still upon her cheeks. She was most warmly welcomed, and it was soon decided that a school for the children should be opened in “the clock room,” under her tuition. The necessary arrangements were soon made and the school commenced. Besides the regular school hours an innovation was introduced. Immediately after supper, one hour was devoted to dancing—instruction and practice. The music was furnished by the hired man, Dan Foster, who was an accomplished singer of dancing tunes.

In the spring Miss Cook obtained an apartment in the large Academy building at Chester, and taught a most prosperous school for two seasons embracing the whole school year except the winter, which she spent for the second time with us. My sister Betsey and Abigail Brown, daughter of Uncle Nat, were pupils in her school at Chester. She was a woman of very great ability and great tact and skill in teaching. She afterwards went to Massachusetts, where she married a Methodist preacher named Fillmore, a cousin of President Fillmore. She is now (November, 1891) living at Providence, R. I., a widow, at the great age of 95 years. [Mrs. Fillmore died January 29, 1893.] I owe a debt of gratitude to her to for the benefit I received at her hands. She brought to our house a variety of books, of which there was great dearth, and I remember reading loud a great part of Shakespeare's Play and also of lying upon the floor to represent Romeo while she painted the death scene.